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A GREEK PROVERB IN MODERN IRISH

The presence of the old Greek proverb, 'Οψὲ θῶν ἀλέοντι μύλοι, ἀλέοντι & λεπτά, in Modern-Irish form is at once challenging. How did it come about? Were it not for the telltale lines of the second half, one might be led to pronounce the Irish version to be a fossilized testimony of the familiarity possessed by the mediaeval Irish with classical tradition. That it was incorporated by the Irish with their proverbial lore fairly recently will be evident, I believe, from the discussion. The proverb in question is printed in a collection of Irish proverbs entitled *Seanfhocla Uladh* (*The Proverbs of Ulster*), and runs as follows:

Tá muileann Dé mall,
 Acht meileann sé go mín,
 Fanann sé le foighid,
 Is glacann sé an t-iomlán.¹
 The mill of God is slow,
 But it grinds fine,
 He waits with patience,
 And He takes all.

This collection, the editor says, was made in part from oral and in part from literary sources. Whether the above version was picked off fresh from the mouth of the people, or was transcribed from a manuscript, cannot be determined by the reader. To attempt to trace its literary voyaging from the eastern to the western world would require an intimate knowledge of the deeps of literary undercurrents; but it may not be superfluous to point out some of the places it has touched.

The earliest mention of the proverb I have been able to discover occurs in Plutarch's *Moralia*.² Olympicus, in the famous "Concerning Such Whom God is Slow to Punish," 549 D, expresses to Patrocleas the opinion that the slowness of execution takes away the belief in providence. "I cannot conceive," he continues, "what benefit there is in these mill-stones of the gods which are said to grind so late, as thereby celestial punishment is obscured, and the awe of evil-doing rendered vain and despicable." However Plutarch came by it, whether from popular or from literary tradition, it was apparently a commonplace by his day (50-100 A.D.). The *Moralia* are shot through with quotations from lost Greek poems, especially with verses from the dramatists. It is doubtful, however, whether this line owes its origin to the drama; the dactylic hexameter of its verse-measure, together with its presence in the *Oracula Sibyllina*³ (in a slightly varied form, 'Οψὲ θεοῦ μύλοι ἀλέοντι τὸ λεπτὸν

¹ *Seanfhocla Uladh*, collected and edited by Enri Ua Muirgheasa, Dublin, 1907.

² *Plutarch's Morals*, transl. by John Philips, in the edition of which William W. Goodwin is the general editor, IV, 1878.

³ *Oracula Sibyllina*, ed. by Friedlieb, Book VIII, l. 14 (1852). Probable date is 211 A.D.

ἀλευρον), leads to the inference that it is not a dramatic invention, but an oracular utterance. This view seems to be upheld by the tenor of the remarks of Origen (185–254 A.D.), the father of church science, who cites the same proverb in his *Kατὰ Κέλσον*: “As to the punishments threatened against the ungodly, these will come upon them after they have refused all remedies. . . . Such is our doctrine of punishment; and the inculcation of this doctrine turns many from their sins. But let us see, on the other hand, what is the response given on this subject by the priest of Jupiter or Apollo of whom Celsus speaks. It is this: ‘The mills of God grind slowly’” (*Οὐκέ, φησὶ, θεῶν δλέονται μύλοι*).¹ In a footnote the editor adds: “‘The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind to powder.’—Plutarch.”

The line, in the form printed first above, makes its appearance in the *Adversus Grammaticos*² of Sextus Empiricus (ca. 200 A.D.), and also in the *Paroemiographi Graeci*,³ where it is followed by the gloss: ἐπὶ τῶν ὁψιάτα καὶ βραδέως παρεχόντων δίκην, ὃν ἐπλημμέλησαν.

It may have been Friedrich von Logau who gave it its impulse among the moderns;⁴ at any rate, it was he who established it in the literary form most popular with us and best known to us through Longfellow’s translation:

GÖTTLICHE RACHE

Gottes Mühlen mahlen langsam, mahlen aber trefflich klein,
Ob aus Langmuth er sich säumet, bringt mit Schärf’ er alles ein.

RETRIBUTION

Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small;
Though with patience he stands waiting, with exactness grinds he all.—
Longfellow.

The epigrammists contemporary with Logau plundered the classics freely. Logau himself, however, according to Gedichte No. 433, composed the greater part of his epigrams; no doubt this is true of the latter half of the above version. In various collections of proverbs it is quoted in its abbreviated form sometimes as German, sometimes as oriental. Earlier than Logau, however, George Herbert (1593–1633) included it in his *Jacula Prudentum*: “God’s mill grinds slow, but sure.”

The conception of the tardy, but inexorable, vengeance of God finds expression among all nations. The nearest approach in French to the version discussed above comes from Voltaire. In *Mérope*, I. iv, Polyphonte says:

¹ *Writings of Origen*, ed. and transl. by Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D., and James Donaldson, II (1872).

² *Sexti Empirici Opera*, ed. by Albertus Fabricius, II, 112 (1841).

³ *Paroemiographi Graeci*, ed. by Gaisford, C 396.

⁴ The first edition of the *Sinngedichte* was published in 1638, the second in 1654.

Je connais le sort, il peut démentir:
 De la nuit du silence un secret peut sortir;
 Et des dieux quelque fois la longue patience
 Fait sur nous à pas lent descendre la vengeance.

It will be observed now that the obligation of the Irish borrowing rests between von Logau and Longfellow. From the lack of more exact knowledge of the source whence the editor of the Irish collection obtained the verse, however, I can render no further judgment than that, in my opinion, the probabilities of origin point to Longfellow.¹

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GREEK LAW IN ROMAN COMEDY

In every discussion of Plautus or Terence, the fundamental question always is the degree of fidelity to their originals which we must assume for them. In the pages of the principal periodicals dealing with the history of Roman law, we meet at every point with a very intelligible distrust of Roman comedy as a *fons iuris*, which, however, is based much more on the non-Roman character of the subject-matter than on the peculiarities of the literary *genre* in which it is found. If the point which the following observations seek to establish is valid, there are numerous cases in which the suspicion is unfounded.

Two passages of Plautus, *Stichus*, vss. 446 ff., and *Casina*, vss. 68 f., are referred to by Krüger, *Geschichte der Quellen des röm. Rechts*, p. 77.

Stichus, vss. 446–48:

atque ne id vos miremini homines servulos
 potare amare atque ad cenam condicere
 licet haec Athenis nobis.

The purpose of these lines is explicitly stated. They are meant to explain a situation which would otherwise excite surprise, even though taking the audience into one's confidence in the very course of the action is a somewhat primitive device. The same effect is better produced in the *Casina* passage because it is there done in the prologue, the natural place for explanations of this sort.

Casina, vss. 68 f.:

sunt hic inter se quos nunc credo dicere:
 quaeso hercle quid istuc est? serviles nuptiae?

It is immaterial whether this passage together with the first part of the prologue is non-Plautine or not. Audiences had not appreciably changed in Rome between Plautus and the succeeding generation.

With these, a number of other passages may be compared.

¹ Since writing the above article I have come upon, in an Irish newspaper, a wording of the proverb in question which sounds less literary than the verse quoted at the beginning: Is mall meilid mulitte D6—The mills of God grind slowly.